

A Stylistic Analysis of Tennyson's Poem "The Eagle"

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Abstract: This article attempts to analyze Tennyson's poem "The Eagle" from the perspective of stylistic analysis. The analysis is made under the aspects of graphological, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns to form the basis for the analysis which is helpful in understanding the basic content and form of the poem. The purpose of this article is to find out the stylistic devices which the poet has exploited to enhance his message. It is concluded that the stylistic devices the poet has employed in this poem play a very significant role in helping the readers grasp the meanings and message that he is trying to convey.

Keywords: Style, Stylistics, Stylistic analysis, Tennyson.

1. Introduction

The word "poetry" comes from Old French "poetrie". It comes from Medieval Latin "poetria" and Latin "poeta". In ancient time, poetry was called poesy. The word "poesy" comes from Middle English "poesie", from Middle French and Latin "poesis" and from Greek "poiési". Poetry which is a form of literature is also known as expressive music as it retains both expressive and musical qualities. Poetry retains an artistic arrangement of different sounds and senses which create particular feelings, emotions and moods in the audience or readers. Poetry is a genre of literature. It reveals mystery, beauty, feeling, emotion, sentiment etc. through the artistic language colored with imagination. It is a composition in verse or metrical language. It can be defined as an expression of elevated thought, imagination and feeling in rhythmic language of metrical composition. It is rich in the use of figures of speech. It is different from other genres because it is more emotional, more musical and more imaginative.

Style is a distinctive way of using language to convey the intended meaning in an appropriate manner and stylistics is the study of the distinctive expression of language.

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), a representative poet of the Victorian Era, is very careful to present his poem that contains rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and figures of speech. His poetry is usually revised and drafted. His verse is highly musical. His poetry shows exquisite language and poetic skills. His language represents all that is elegant and musical in the art of versification.

"The Eagle" is one of Tennyson's shortest lyric poems, probably the shortest of his famous poems. It was written in 1813 during the trip through the French Pyrenees, but it was published twenty years later in the seventh edition of his poems. The poem represents a major theme which is the image of power and how superiority can dominate inferiority. This poem can be treated as a descriptive poem or as a symbolic poem. If we treat it as a descriptive poem, it will describe the power, courage, and strength of the eagle.

The fundamental objective of this article is to explore the stylistic devices which the poet has exploited to enhance his message that powerful and audacious creature can dominate the other mediocre creatures. The poem is analyzed through examining its graphological, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels.

2. Literature Review

The literature review in this article retains just definitions of style, stylistics and levels of stylistic analysis.

2.1 Style

The term "Style" is derived from Latin word "elocution" and a Greek word "lexis". Cuddon (1998) defines style as the characteristic manner of expression in prose or verse; "how a particular writer says things" (p.872). Harmon (2006) views that style combines two elements: "the idea to be expressed and the individuality of the author" (p.503). According to Wales (2001), style refers to the "perceived distinctive manner of expression" in writing or speaking (p.71). Leech and Short (1981) further elaborate that style is the "dress of thoughts" (p.15). These definitions enunciate that style is a distinctive way of using language for expressing ideas, emotions, feelings, thoughts and messages in the particular situations. Like the personalities of persons, style differs from person to person.

2.2 Stylistics

Widdowson (1975) defines stylistics as the study of literary discourse from a "linguistic orientation" (p.3). According to Short and Candlin (1989), stylistics is a linguistic approach to "the study of the literary texts" (183). Carter (1996) argues on the relevance of stylistics for literature teaching stating that stylistic analysis helps to foster "interpretative skills and to encourage reading between the lines" (p.5). He further posits the advantages of stylistics stating that stylistics provides students with a method of scrutinizing texts, 'a way in' to a text, opening up starting points for complete interpretation.

2.3 Levels of Stylistic Analysis

The following are the levels of stylistics. We analyze the text according to these levels.

2.3.1 Graphological level

Leech (1969) claims that graphology exceeds orthography. It refers to the whole writing system: “punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing” (p.39). According to Crystal and Davy (1969), graphology is the analogous study of a languages writing system or orthography as seen in the various kinds of handwriting or topography. These are “the formalized rules of writing” (p.18).

2.3.2 Phonological level

Lodge (2009) views phonology to be the study of linguistic systems, specifically the way in which “sound represents differences of meaning in a language” (p.8).

2.3.3 Morphological level

In the view of Mark and Kirsten (2005), morphology is the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that ‘deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed’ (p.1).

2.3.4 Lexical level

This deals with level of “Lexis”. Lexis is the vocabulary items that make up a language or the body of words known and used by a particular person.

2.3.5 Syntactic level

According to Tallerman (1998), syntax means “Sentence construction” (p.1). It deals with how words group together to make phrases and sentences. Syntax is related to the formation of phrases, clauses and sentences.

2.3.6 Semantic level

Semantic level deals with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. It includes metaphor, simile, personification and other literary devices.

3. Purpose of the study

- a. To investigate the stylistic devices exploited in the poem.
- b. To explore the message and meaning of the poem.

4. Methodology

The researcher has followed graphological, morphological, phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of analysis to form the basis for stylistic analysis of this poem “The Eagle” of Tennyson.

5. Stylistic analysis of the poem

5.1 Graphological level

The poem “The Eagle” consists of two stanzas. The first stanza consists of three lines of regular length. All the verse lines retain eight words. It means each verse line is octasyllabic. The second stanza consists of three poetic lines having eight words in each line. The regularity of the length of lines and stanzas may suggest the regular, ordered and powerful life style of the eagle which can survive lonely and retains the ability to dominate others.

All the poetic lines begin with the words which employ the capital letters. There are two semicolons, two commas and two periods. The regularity of punctuation shows that this poem is also strong at its graphological level. The first line ends in a semicolon, the second line ends in a comma and the third line ends in a period in each stanza.

5.2 Phonological level

Tennyson, one of the best poets in Britain, is a poet known for his ability to sense and hear the music of words. The first feature that strikes us in this poem is his employment of sounds. He uses some sound devices to represent the perfect and mighty image of the eagle.

5.2.1 Rhyme

Rhyme is one of the most popular sound devices of poetry. Rhyme, in general, is the recurrence of the identical vowel sound(s) followed by the same consonant sound(s) in the words that begin with different consonant sounds. It is a fundamental memory device in poetry. This brief poem with two stanzas retains the masculine end rhyme. The rhyme scheme of the poem is aaa bbb. It creates a sense of harmony and power. Each stanza of this poem is triplet. The rhyming words are “hands / lands / stands” in the first stanza and “crawls / walls / falls” in the second stanza.

5.2.2 Meter / Rhythm

Meter is a fixed pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of verse. This fixed pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables is named a particular foot that is a unit of meter or regular rhythm. According to Abrams (1993), meter is determined by the pattern of stronger and weaker stresses in the syllables “composing the words in the verse-line” (p.112). The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables which creates a pleasing and melodious flow of sounds in a prose or verse line is called rhythm.

Each verse line employs a disyllabic foot in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed. Such a metrical foot is termed as iambic. There are four iambic feet in each verse line. This poem is composed in iambic tetrameter. The poet has exploited the poetical stress license in the words “Close” and “Ring’d” by treating them as unstressed ones. Generally, they are major words and they are stressed. The verse has the regular rhythmic pattern:

u - u - u - u -
He clasps | the crag | with crook | ed hands

5.2.3 Alliteration

Alliteration is a sound device which involves the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of the stressed words in the same line or adjacent lines of verse. There is an alliteration of the plosive /k/ sound in "clasp", "crag" and "crooked" that create a strong onomatopoeic effect in the first verse line. It is a harsh consonant to show the power and domination of the eagle. There is an alliteration of /l/ sound in "lonely / lands" in the second line that shows the superiority and uniqueness of the authority. The harsh consonant sound /k/ makes the readers pause and meditate for a while.

5.2.4 Consonance

Consonance is the close repetition of an identical consonant sound in the middle or final position of the words. Such a repetition of the consonant sound occurs before and after different vowels. There is a final consonance of /z/ in "close" and "lands" in the second line and /d/ in "ringed" and "world" in the third line. Both /z/ and /d/ are harsh or strong or voiced sound.

5.2.5 Consonant Cluster

A consonant cluster is a sequence of consonant sounds occurring together in a word. We can notice the initial consonant cluster /kl-/ in the word "clasp", /kr-/ in the word "crag" and /kr-/ in the word "crooked" in the first line; /kl-/ in "close" in the second line; /st-/ in "stands" in the third line; and /kr-/ in "crawls" fourth line. We can also note eight words that retain the final consonant cluster such as /-sps/ in "clasps", /-ndz/ in "hands", "lands" and "stands" and /-lz/ in "crawls", "walls" and "falls". There is /-lt/ consonant cluster in "thunderbolt". There are two inter-syllabic consonant clusters /-nt-/ in "mountain" and /-nd-/ in "thunderbolt". There are thirty monosyllabic words, eight disyllabic words and only one trisyllabic word in the poem. The monosyllabic words create lucidity and musicality in the poem.

5.2.6 Assonance

Assonance refers to the same or similar vowel sounds in stressed words / syllables that end with different consonant sounds. It produces a particular effect of euphony. It is usually used within a line of poetry for unity and a rhythmic effect. There is assonance of a vowel sound /æ/ in "clasp", "crag" and "lands" in the first line, a diphthong /əʊ/ in "close" and "lonely" in the second line and /I/ in "wrinkle" and "beneath".

5.2.7 Hardness and Softness of Consonant Sounds

Consonants can be described in terms of their harshness and softness. Every language has its own level of harshness and softness of its consonants. The following is the division of harsh and soft consonants in case of English.

Distribution of Consonant Sounds in Terms of Quality

S.N.	Types	Strong (Harsh)	Soft (Mild)
1.	Bilabial	/ b / , / p /	/ m / , / w /
2.	Labio-dental	/ f / , / v /	-----
3.	Dental (inter-dental)	/ θ / , / ð /	-----
4.	Palato-alveolar	/ tʃ / , / dʒ / , / ʃ / , / ʒ /
5.	Alveolar	/ t / , / d / , / s / , / z /	/ n / , / l /
6.	Velar	/ k / , / g /	/ ŋ /
7.	Glottal	/ h /	-----
8.	Post-alveolar	/ r /
9.	Palatal	/ j /

Words beginning with harsh consonant sounds are "he , clasps, the, crag, crooked, hands, stands, close, to, sun, sea, beneath, him, crawls, from, his, thunderbolt and falls" and words beginning with the soft consonant sounds are "With, lonely, lands, ring'd, world, wrinkle, walls, watches, mountain and like". It is obvious that there are more words which begin with harsh consonant sounds than the words which begin with soft consonant sounds in the poem. It might suggest that the poet desires to focus on the power and cruelty or harshness of the eagle. One of the striking sound features of the poem is that every verse line ends in "s" that is pronounced as /z/ which is a harsh consonant sound.

5.3 Morphological level

This poem consists of free morphemes and bound morphemes. Free morpheme involves lexical and functional morphemes. Lexical morphemes employed in this poem are “clasp”, “crag”, “crook”, “hand”, “close”, “sun”, “lonely”, “land”, “ring”, “azure”, “world”, “stand”, “wrinkle”, “sea”, “crawl”, “watch”, “mountain”, “wall”, “thunderbolt” and “fall”. Functional morphemes are “he”, “the”, “with”, “to”, “in”, “beneath”, “from”, “his”, “and”, “like” and “a”. The bound morphemes can be inflectional morphemes and derivational morphemes. The inflectional morphemes are “-s” in “clasps/ hands/ lands/ stands/ crawls/ walls/ falls”, “-es” in “watches” and “-ed” in “ring’d”. The derivational morphemes are “-ed” in “crooked” and “wrinkled”. There is only one compound word “thunderbolt” in the poem. The ample use of free morphemes might hint at the freedom of the eagle.

5.4 Lexical level

The major words used in the poems are main verbs such as “clasps”, “ring’d”, “stands”, “crawls”, “watches” and “falls”. The verbs indicate the actions of the eagle. The nouns are “crag”, “hands”, “sun”, “lands”, “world”, “walls”, “and mountain” and “thunderbolt” play a prominent role in establishing the situation of the eagle in the setting. There are four adjectives “crooked”, “lonely”, “azure” and “wrinkled”. The first two adjectives are related to the bird, while the second two adjectives are related to the sky and the sea respectively. There is only one adverb “close” in the poem. The minor words employed in this poem are “he”, “the”, “with”, “to”, “beneath”, “him”, “his”, “from”, and”, “like” and “a”.

Parts of speech used in the poem are given below:

Parts of speech	Words
Nouns	crag, hands, sun, lands, world, walls, mountain , thunderbolt
Main verbs	clasps, ‘ring’d’, stands, crawls, watches, falls
Adjectives	crooked, lonely, azure, wrinkled
Adverbs	close
Auxiliary verb
Pronouns	he, him, his
Prepositions	to, in, with, from, beneath, like
Conjunctions	and
Articles	a, the

5.5 Syntactic level

“The Eagle” is a brief poem written in iambic tetrameter. All the verse lines are in statement patterns though the second line lacks the verb. The first, fourth and fifth lines begin with the subject, the second verse line begins with an adverb “close”, the third line begins with a past participle form of verb “Ring’d” and the sixth line begins with a conjunction “and”. All the sentences are in active forms. We can notice the inversion in sentence patterns that end in “he + v^s” in “he stands” and “he falls” in the third and sixth lines. We can consider it as parallelism. The readers notice parallelism in the construction of the prepositional phrase “with crooked hands” and “in lonely lands” which involve (preposition + adjective + noun) in the first and second verse lines. Similarly, another parallelism is seen in the construction of a noun phrases “the azure world” and “the wrinkled sea” which involve (the + adjective + noun) in the third and fourth lines.

5.6 Semantic level

Tennyson describes the eagle which is one of the strongest birds and it usually lives high up on mountains. The poet describes that the eagle holds sharp rock with his strong hands without fear. He stands majestically high up on mountains, far away from all other creatures. The poet observes the lonely eagle with a great admiration. He flies very high until he reaches near the hot sun. The first stanza reflects the strength and the honor of the eagle which is attributed to the glory and magnificent heights, he reaches. The sky and the land are parts of his property. In the second stanza, the poet compares the movement of the eagle with that of the sea. The eagle’s movement attack is compared to the thunderbolt, while the sea movement to the crawling of a slow animal or baby. This comparison stresses the greatness and high speed of the eagle compared with the sea movement. This indicates the servility of all objects before him. When the eagle sees his victim, he flies very fast towards it like a thunderbolt. The poet has employed the following rhetorical devices:

5.6.1 Symbol

Symbol is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for something else’. “The Eagle” by Tennyson is a symbolic poem in which he considers the eagle as a symbol of a powerful, strong and courageous person, and the sea as a symbol of a person who is demure, weak and scared. The eagle can be a symbol of a powerful, affluent and developed country which can stand alone but retains the power, capacity, skills and weapons to dominate other countries which are weak, poor and underdeveloped.

5.6.2 Simile

Simile is a figure of speech in which two essentially dissimilar items are expressly compared with one by using like or as. The simile in the last line “like a thunderbolt he falls” compares the speed of the eagle to that of a thunder and lightning, making him appear like some supreme creature.

5.6.3 Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which two unlike objects are implicitly compared without the use of like or as. The speaker employs submerged metaphor “mountain walls” to mean the readers that mountains are walls for the eagle. Such walls are very high beyond the reach of ordinary creatures.

5.6.4 Imagery

Imagery in a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind, and any sensory or extra-sensory experience. This symbolic poem is full of visual images that can be seen by the mind's eye. The “eagle” is a major a visual image. “Crag”, “sun”, “Crooked hands”, “azure world”, “stands”, “wrinkled sea”, “mountain walls” and “thunderbolt” are visual images. “Crawls” and “falls” are both visual and kinesthetic images. “Crawls” suggests a slow speed of the sea, while “falls” tells us about a very high speed of the eagle. All these images reflect the power, strength, high speed and harshness of the eagle.

5.6.5 Personification

Personification is a figure of speech or trope in which an inanimate object, an animate non-human or abstract quality is given human attributes. Personification means giving human characteristic to an object, an animal, or an abstract idea. In this poem, the eagle is personified more than once by giving him human qualities which make him seem even more majestic, powerful and awe-inspiring like a powerful person. “crooked hands”, “he stands”, “he falls”, and “he watches” provide the eagle with human characteristics of standing, falling and watching. It is a personification as birds don't have hand, but they mean claws, so he makes the eagle as a person. The sea is also personified as a weak or feeble person or a baby, crawling on hands and knees to indicate the lower, inferior position of sea in comparison with the eagle

5.6.6 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a common figure popularly known as exaggeration or over-statement, often used for emphasis as a sign of great emotion or passion or importance. The poet asserts the eagle lives “close to the sun”. It is a hyperbolic expression that tells us that the eagle lives in lonely lands very near the sun. No other being could live there.

6 Conclusion

The poem “the Eagle” by Tennyson is a symbolic brief poem that can be explained, interpreted and analyzed from diverse perspectives. Explicitly, the poem is about an eagle and its power, its cruelty and its domination on ordinary creatures. Implicitly, the poem might be about a powerful, affluent and dominating nation or person in the world. This poem sounds perfect from the stylistic point of view.

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